JUDGE NOT

Luke 6:37–42

Key Verses: 6:37–38a

“Judge not, and you will not be judged;

condemn not, and you will not be condemned;

forgive, and you will be forgiven;

give, and it will be given to you.”

Have you ever heard what people were saying but were not really listening? It happens all the time, right? Honestly, a lot of human speech can sound like pure noise. But there are times when something really important is being said, yet we habitually tune it out, only later to find ourselves lost. The past two weeks we’ve been studying Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. It may be the most profound sermon ever spoken by anyone in history. Jesus’ words here are radical, beautiful and convicting all at once. They touch on some of the most fundamental elements of life. His words have the power to transform ordinary, earthbound people into kingdom people. The question is, are we listening? In this third part of his sermon Jesus hones in on a specific problem we all tend to have—judging others. Why it this such a problem? How we can overcome it? And why should we? May God help us really listen to Jesus today.

From the beginning of his ministry Jesus’ words were special. When he visited his hometown people, they marveled at the gracious words coming from his mouth (4:17–22). But soon his words of truth made them so angry they tried to throw him down a cliff (4:23–29). In the synagogue in Capernaum his word possessed such authority that people were astonished (4:31–32). His word had power even to command an unclean spirit to come out of a man (4:35–36). When Simon Peter obeyed Jesus’ word, he made an astonishing catch of fish (5:4–9). The sheer power of Jesus’ word healed a man full of leprosy (5:12–13). With the authority of his word he both forgave the sins and cured the paralysis of a helpless man (5:24–25). With the power of his word he restored a man’s withered hand (6:10). Luke will continue to develop this theme of Jesus’ words.

All the while, the religious leaders were getting increasingly uncomfortable. They questioned his authority, his holiness and his legitimacy as a teacher. Finally, they were so filled with fury they began plotting to get rid of him. Jesus knew the darkness was all around him. Through an all-night prayer session God led him to focus on raising twelve apostles. They would eventually go out with the light of God’s kingdom and forgiveness. But it was more than a message Jesus was sending them to give. He wanted *them* to *be* the message, to be utterly changed in both mind and heart. That seems impossible. How could it happen? The only way is through Jesus’ words. So now comes his Sermon on the Mount.

In the first part of the sermon he said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!” (20–22) These are not just words. These four unforgettable blessings of Jesus, contrary to the ways of the world, can completely change our way of thinking, even what we value. In the second part of his sermon he said, “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (27–28). This so goes against our nature. Who ever said something like this? These four challenges of Jesus can change us from people with selfish love to those who show God’s love even to the worst people. Now in this third part of his sermon Jesus has four more commands. Let’s read them in verses 37–38a. Once again, his words are poetry, with simplicity, symmetry and rhythm. They’re so direct, and so powerful.

To grasp their meaning let’s first review the context. Thus far in this sermon what have we learned? Jesus has been telling us that if we’re really going to live as his followers, we need kingdom values we’re willing to suffer for. We need new habits. We need to be showing God’s love even to those who hurt us. Now he’s saying that even our way of thinking about people needs to change. In Greek verse 37 begins with the word “and,” telling us that this third section is closely connected to the previous one. In verses 35–36 Jesus has just taught us to become more like God, whose mercy is greater than we know (2Sa 24:14). Many people’s concept of God’s mercy is something for us to just keep taking and enjoying. But Jesus is challenging us to *be merciful* like God is.

To do that, he comes on strongly. Read verse 37 again. In Greek he’s literally saying, “Stop judging,” and “stop condemning.” And he’s not talking to the ultra-critical Pharisees; he’s training his disciples. Clearly everybody’s got a problem with this. We all judge and condemn, all the time, even if we’re not saying anything. It’s such a deeply ingrained way of thinking, we’re not even aware we’re doing it. As part of his training, Jesus doesn’t just say “stop;” he shows us how to replace our bad habits with good ones. Instead of thinking judgmental thoughts, we are to reflect on how to forgive people. Instead of being ready to condemn, we are to start thinking about giving, even to people who don’t deserve it. Just like his instructions on loving, it’s not just about thinking; these are very specific, tangible actions we need to start taking. We may not feel like it at first, but as we choose to think and act in these positive ways, people probably won’t change, but we will.

To accept Jesus’ words, maybe we should examine why we judge and condemn people in the first place. There might be many reasons. We especially do it when people are just not like us. They don’t meet our expectations or standards. And they seem too strong or too stubborn to change to our way. In our divisive culture there’s a phenomenon called “shaming.” It’s usually done on social media and can get really vicious. Sometimes the shamers want people to change, but often it’s just to crush and get rid of them. People often enjoy exposing others’ weaknesses. Why? To try and feel better about themselves. But when it involves religion, it gets way more intense. People think they need to be clear about sin. To do that, they think they need to strongly condemn those living in sin—rebuke them, call them out, shame them! But notice in this sermon Jesus doesn’t even once tell us to do that. In fact he says just the opposite. At its core, judging and condemning means we’re trying to take the place of God (Jas4:12).

We really need to stop doing it. But we don’t want to. We feel empowered. We feel like we had a voice. It feels good to blow off the steam of judging and condemning. Jesus knows us so well, and so he singles out this issue and really digs into it. He gives us some warnings and some promises to motivate us to stop and to change. He says if we judge, we too will be judged. If we condemn, we too will be condemned. He’s not playing around; he means it. How we treat others is how God is going to treat us (Mt18:32–35).

On the other hand, he adds that if we forgive, we’ll be forgiven. Actually we’ve already been forgiven of everything bad we’ve ever done, are doing now or ever will do. It’s mind-blowing. We’re forgiven, regardless of what we do? How’s that? It’s because Jesus died for our sins, for all of it. He took all the punishment we deserve. On the cross our sins died with him. It was “once for all.” All we have to do is believe it. It’s called “free grace” (Ro3:24). So in a sense, forgiving others isn’t going to earn us forgiveness. But Jesus is saying that, in another sense, our forgiveness depends on how forgiving we are of others. Why? It’s because how much we forgive others shows how much we’ve accepted God’s forgiveness. How can we receive so great a grace from God, yet always be judging and criticizing others? Jesus is also saying that though people can’t always see, God is closely watching how we’re viewing and treating others. Do we have judgmental thoughts? God sees it and really doesn’t like it. Opposite of what we may think, judging and condemning others doesn’t please God at all. Elsewhere, the Bible says judgmental thoughts are “evil thoughts” (Jas2:4b). Jesus’ followers aren’t supposed to be so evil. Sadly, Christians are known as some of the most judgmental people. Churches can be toxic with judgmentalism. Regardless of what people may be trying to teach, Jesus our Lord is so strongly against this.

To motivate us, he gives us another vivid image. Read verse 38b. He’s describing a commonplace experience at that time in a local market. To buy grain, people would sit down and form a deep pocket in their lap with their robe. They’d pay a price, and then the merchant would measure out the right amount and fill their lap with grain. But a generous merchant would work with the buyer. He’d let him shake the grain and press it down to make room for more, then he'd keep pouring until the grain was even running over onto the ground. Jesus is saying God is just like that. God is not stingy; he’s so kind and generous with us. He gives us way more than we probably should get. What’s the point? Jesus concludes, “For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.” We need to learn treat people as kindly and generously as our Father God does.

Jesus keeps talking about judgmentalism. Read verse 39. It was a common expression at the time. If we’re blind, now can we lead others? It’s especially true with regards to our sin. If we’re unaware of our own sin, how can we possibly help anybody else? But when we’re self-righteous, we’re notoriously blind to our own hidden faults. Read verse 40. This again is both a promise and a warning. If we make self-righteous people our teachers, we’ll become just as blind and self-righteous as they are. But if we make Jesus our teacher and let his words train us, even we can become like him! The question is, how deep are we willing to go? How much are we willing to listen and let his words fully train us?

Jesus goes on to say one thing more about judgmentalism. Read verses 41–42. This is comedy, exaggerating a huge difference. Having a speck in the eye can be pretty uncomfortable. In contrast, in Greek the word for “log” actually refers to the main beam of a house. Of course if that’s inserted into our body anywhere, especially in the head where the eye is, it’s called massive trauma and we’re unlike to survive. How silly for somebody in such dire straits to be worried about somebody else’s speck! With biting irony Jesus says to “first take the log out of [our] own eye, and then [we] will see clearly to remove” another person’s speck. In other words, only through personal repentance can we have any insight to help others. This repentance means seeing how my sin is way more serious than anyone’s small flaws or faults. Instead of focusing on others’ issues, we need to get serious about our own. We all tend to cover over our own problems and exaggerate others’. Jesus is saying that if we’re going to follow him, we need to be doing just the opposite.

Read verses 37–38a again. Are these just words we’ve heard so many times, or are we really listening? May God help us replace our bad habits of judging and condemning with the good habits of forgiving and giving. May we learn to focus on our own problems instead of worrying about others’. May we really be listening to Jesus’ words and let them fully train us until we actually become more and more like him.